

At 81, Still a Master Of Reinvention: [Movies, Performing Arts/Weekend Desk]

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THREE-QUARTERS of an hour before sunrise, **Melvin Van Peebles** glided up the sleeping West Side, a slender man in an orange hoodie, leading a reporter on his five-times-a-week morning run. His legs were toned and without blemish, his hair and beard a gentle white. He had a story about why he was tired on this September morning, but it is not suitable for publication, and might not be true, anyway.

"Don't ask me something if you don't want to know," he said. "Because I will tell you."

Mr. Van Peebles, best known for his pioneering 1971 independent film, "Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song," just turned 81, but for most of those years he has seemed brand-new. Now, in an exhibition called "eMerge 2.0: **Melvin Van Peebles & Artists on the Cusp**," running through Nov. 7 at the Strivers Gardens Gallery, on West 135th Street in Hamilton Heights, he is making his public debut as a visual artist. That adds to a résumé that includes filmmaker, composer, actor, novelist, Wall Street trader, San Francisco cable car driver, playwright, bandleader, vocalist and, by his own account, bon vivant.

"My Tuesday girlfriend's husband wanted to take me out on Wednesday," he began one story. (The rest is best left to your imagination.)

Mr. Van Peebles would like to bring out a line of sneakers and sportswear next. After that, who knows? As a pink dawn illuminated the Hudson, he gestured toward the George Washington Bridge in the distance. "Sometimes I run across and then back," he said. "That's about 20 miles."

The morning was crisp, the light was golden, and the two runners were panting lightly, neither likely to survive a run to New Jersey and back. "We've got our health," Mr. Van Peebles said, stopping at a bench in Riverside Park. "We are truly blessed."

The Strivers Gardens exhibition features two paintings from his art collection, along with his own mixed-media work "Ex-Voto Monochrome (A Ghetto Mother's Prayer)," a large rectangle of framed blue concrete flanked by two white feathered wings. Like his films and plays, it combines an urban social consciousness – a mother's prayer is for her child's safe deliverance, he said – with a sense of DIY mischief, as if he had created it just because someone said he couldn't.

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Mr. Van Peebles offered a tour, brandishing an unlit cigar stub and changing from coffee to a little rum at about 8 a.m. Although he has not exhibited these works, he said that art making was less a new chapter for him than an intersection of two old ones. He studied art as a teenager at the Art Institute of Chicago and earned money in the 1950s painting portraits in Mexico; he has always improvised, adjusting his path according to whim and opportunity, whatever the obstacles, he said.

"Why not have fun, man?" he said. "If I feel like doing something, I just go ahead and do it."

Lately, this has meant fronting a funk and soul band called Melvin Van Peebles wid Laxative (so named for their productivity) and working with young admirers like Peter Wright, known as Souleo, 28, a curator who helped put together the gallery show. Lee Walker, 40, a filmmaker, is meanwhile hustling a vision of Melvin Van Peebles athletic gear, to be followed by a line of books and perhaps animated films.

"We're looking at some offers now," Mr. Walker said of the sportswear manufacturers. "He's 81 years old with abs." Asked what he had learned from Mr. Van Peebles, he said: "He knows how to treat the money. You got to hold onto it."

Mr. Van Peebles said he has been drawn to visual art lately because it does not require raising money or running a big production. His filmmaking career has been one of fighting with Hollywood over money and opportunities, with Mr. Van Peebles always living to fight another day. This time, he said, he is able to use his name to give other artists exposure.

"It's such a privilege," he said of the exhibition, which includes two paintings by George Helton, a former assistant's husband, who died in 1984. "This is what I fought for, to make it accessible to the people."

In the meantime, he keeps working and running, letting the world know he is still at it.

"I've had very narrow escapes, let's say," he said. "For example, if somebody hits me, or this or that, my first thought is, wow, I'm still around here to get hit. Wow, ain't that great?"

He added: "I'm not going to let the accolades come to me when I'm in a wheelchair. 'Get a little more feeble, Melvin, and we'll recognize you.' Right now I'm a little too dangerous. I intend to stay dangerous."

The morning light streamed onto his terrace. Mr. Van Peebles disappeared into another room and put on a vinyl album of one of his soundtracks, all composed using numbers instead of notes because he never learned musical notation.

When the song ended, he lifted the needle and put on another soundtrack, louder than the first.

"Now don't take this too personally, but I'm having a wonderful time," he said. "We don't get this too often, where we can just enjoy ourselves, etc. etc."

But you couldn't help thinking that Mr. Van Peebles gets this all the time.

Photograph

Melvin Van Peebles with "Ex-Voto Monochrome (a Ghetto Mother's Prayer)." (C25); Melvin Van Peebles in His Manhattan Apartment with Artworks Like the Mounted Rear End of a Volkswagen Bus, a Hot Dog Construction That Doubles As a File Cabinet and a Stove Made Out of Plaster. (Photographs by Karsten Moran for the New York Times) (C32)

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